



Slam Bidding (Part II)

Cue-bidding

Cue-bidding is not easy and if at all possible I try not to use it! Blackwood is much easier: it gives you a specific answer that enables you to bid slam accurately. However, I finished last issue's article by mentioning the types of hands on which Blackwood is not suitable. These are the hands on which I will use cue-bidding – not because I want to, but because I have to! The three basic reasons for not using Blackwood are:

1. **Weak side suits** – a suit of two or more cards without the ace or king.
2. **The response would take you too high** – usually this happens if a minor suit has been agreed.
3. **Void suits** – you won't know which aces your partner holds.

What is a cue-bid?

A cue-bid is a bid of a new suit at a high-level when a suit has been agreed as trumps; the bid shows a 'control' in the suit, that is, the ability to win a trick if the suit is led. You can show first- or second-round controls:

First-round control = an ace or a void.
 Second-round control = a king or a singleton.

Opener	Responder
1♠	3♠
4♦	

In this auction the 4♦ bid is not needed in a natural sense, as the spade suit has already been agreed as trumps. Instead,

it is used as a slam-try; showing first-round control of diamonds.

Some experts like to be able to show immediately first- and second-round controls, but I believe this is unnecessarily complicated and can lead to confusion. I like to start by showing first-round controls first and then follow with second-round controls, working my way up the ladder. The only exception to this, as we will see later on, is when one hand is much weaker than the other (for example, responder after a 2♣ opening).

Note that you cannot cue-bid in trumps: a bid of the trump suit is a sign-off (negative).

After 1♠ – 3♠ – 4♦, responder might now bid 4♥, which would suggest first-round control in hearts (ace or void). Without a control to show, responder would bid 4♠.

Weak Side Suits

I try to avoid cue-bidding because it is so difficult, so when I use it, I use it for one of the three reasons mentioned earlier – and I want my partner to work out which one.

As responder to a cue-bid, always try to work out why your partner is cue-bidding (i.e. why didn't he just use Blackwood?).

Take a look at the following sequence, for example:

West	East
1♠	3♠
4♣	4♦
5♣	?

What does it mean?

We are playing in spades – that was agreed after the first two bids. West has made a cue-bid to show the ace of clubs and after East has shown a control in diamonds with his 4♦ cue-bid, West has cue-bid in clubs again. Why has he bothered to do that?

Take a look at the auction shown; what is missing?

No-one has shown a control in hearts!

West seems to be suggesting that a slam might be on, but he is worried about the hearts; he probably has a weakness there and needs partner to hold a control (either ace or king, or a singleton or void) in the suit.

Thus, the solution is that with control of hearts East can cue-bid it, but without control of hearts he should sign-off and bid 5♠

Here is the West hand:

West 1
 ♠ K Q J 4 3 2
 ♥ Q 4 2
 ♦ K Q 3
 ♣ A

You open 1♠ and hear partner respond 3♠. What next? You have a powerhouse: 17 high-card points, an excellent six-card suit and a singleton takes you past 20 total points and adding them to partner's 10-12 you should certainly be hopeful of slam. If you use Blackwood, what will you bid over a two-ace response?

The answer is: you would not know! With East 1 you would want to finish in 5♠ and with East 2 you would want to finish in 6♠, but both have two aces!

East 1
 ♠ A 9 8 5
 ♥ 7 6
 ♦ A J 9 2
 ♣ Q J 3

East 2
 ♠ A 9 8 5
 ♥ K 6
 ♦ A 10 9 2
 ♣ 9 8 3

The problem is that to make a slam viable, you need a control in every suit. West does not have control of the heart suit and thus Blackwood is no good. Instead, he starts cue-bidding, setting in motion the auction shown earlier, as well as the second one shown on the next page.

The two auctions would be:

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West 1		East 1
♠ K Q J 4 3 2		♠ A 9 8 5
♥ Q 4 2		♥ 7 6
♦ K Q 3		♦ A J 9 2
♣ A		♣ Q J 3

West	East
1♠	3♠
4♣	4♦
5♣	5♠
End	

Over 5♣ East 1 has no control in hearts and thus signs off by bidding 5♠, which is far enough – making eleven tricks will be easy.

West 1		East 2
♠ K Q J 4 3 2		♠ A 9 8 5
♥ Q 4 2		♥ K 6
♦ K Q 3		♦ A 10 9 2
♣ A		♣ 9 8 3

West	East
1♠	3♠
4♣	4♦
5♣	6♠
End	

This time East 2 has a control in hearts, so slam has a good chance after opener's strong bidding. With just second-round control in hearts, he bids to 6♠; holding the ace of hearts as well as the ace of trumps he could try for more!

6♠ is not fail-safe; after all West might not have the queen of hearts, but the contract would still be a 50-50 shot, making when North holds the heart ace.

Cue-bidding, however, does not give you all the answers, as you can see. How do you know how good your trumps are? Good question, and there is no precise answer. That is why I like to

use Blackwood: the Key-Card version will tell you all about the trump suit. However, with various types of hands cue-bidding is much more accurate.

When a minor has been agreed

Consider this example:

West 2
♠ 3
♥ K Q 3
♦ A K Q
♣ K Q J 6 5 4

You open 1♣ and your partner responds 3♣. This is a similar start to the auction with the previous West hand, only this time you are even stronger; 20 high-card points, a strong six-card suit and a singleton – wow! Slam is highly likely and yet it is not so easy to bid. Many of us would launch into Blackwood immediately, and after hearing partner's 5♦ response would curse our luck: we would be too high, missing two aces and with no way back to 5♣.

What you need to do is cue-bid:

West 2		East 3
♠ 3		♠ A K 6
♥ K Q 3		♥ 9 7
♦ A K Q		♦ 9 8 7 4
♣ K Q J 6 5 4		♣ A 9 7 2

West	East
1♣	3♣
3♦	3♠
4♥	4♠
5♣	6♣
End	

This bidding sequence may well be puzzling.

Generally, in auctions where a minor suit has been agreed, you will be trying for 3NT, especially at Pairs. So if the auction starts 1♣ – 3♣ – 3♦, the 3♦ bid should be assumed in the first instance to be showing strength in diamonds and suggesting a 3NT contract. How do you know that it is a cue-bid instead?

From West's failure to bid 3NT over East's 3♠. If 3♦ were not a cue-bid, West might bid 3NT after East's 3♠, which shows strength in the suit for no-trump purposes. The fact that West continues with 4♥ over 3♠ clarifies that he has been cue-bidding all along.

What has West shown so far? He has promised the ace (or a void) in diamonds and then his 4♥ bid could be taken to mean that he also has the ace of hearts – it is, after all, his first opportunity to show a heart control.

However, that is not what West is trying to put across: his plan is to cue-bid every suit, so that his partner understands that there is no problem, other than the one he actually has. When West stops in 5♣, East should be asking himself: "We have control of all the suits, so why on earth is partner stopping?"

When you have agreed a minor as your trump suit, you should bear in mind that partner might not be able to use Blackwood.

Here, with all the suits cue-bid, there is no doubt what the problem is. East should consider that, had his partner needed only one ace, he would have used Blackwood but, if he needed two aces, Blackwood would have taken him too high.

So, having worked out that West is looking for two aces, East 3 bids on to 6♣, whilst East 4 passes 5♣.

West 2		East 4
♠ 3		♠ A K Q
♥ K Q 3		♥ J 7
♦ A K Q		♦ J 8 7 4
♣ K Q J 6 5 4		♣ 10 9 7 2

West	East
1♣	3♣
3♦	3♠
4♥	4♠
5♣	End

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Hands with a void

Now let us see a hand with a void:

West 3

- ♠ Void
- ♥ AK 9 8 7 4
- ♦ K Q J 2
- ♣ K 3 2

Once again the auction starts nice and neatly: 1♥ – 3♥, and again you have visions of slam. With partner having four-card heart support, you assume there are likely to be no losers there and it is not unreasonable to think that if partner has one of the minor-suit aces, slam might be on. However, Blackwood will not help you to find this out: partner's one ace could be the ace of spades.

Once again it is time for cue-bidding and although it takes a little getting used to, your next bid is 3♠, saying: "Partner, I have first-round control in spades." (You don't have the ace, but you can win the first round of spades by ruffing.)

West 3		East 5
♠ Void		♠ K 8 6 3
♥ AK 9 8 7 4		♥ Q 6 5 3
♦ K Q J 2		♦ A 3
♣ K 3 2		♣ Q 8 7

West	East
1♥	3♥
3♠	4♦
6♥	End

West 3		East 6
♠ Void		♠ A K 8
♥ AK 9 8 7 4		♥ Q 6 5 3
♦ K Q J 2		♦ 7 6
♣ K 3 2		♣ Q 8 7 6

West	East
1♥	3♥
3♠	4♥
End	

East 5 would cue-bid 4♦ which would be enough to make West jump to 6♥. With six hearts and four diamond tricks, slam is odds-on; West can discard his

partner's clubs on his diamonds, so the club queen is surplus to requirements.

East 6, on the other hand, will not be happy when he hears the 3♠ bid. He will know there is a clash of values: his ace-king opposite partner's void. With no ace to show outside spades, he would therefore sign-off in 4♥ and West would quietly pass.

Cue-bidding before using Blackwood

As I keep emphasising, the ideal is to use Blackwood and you can still use it after you have started cue-bidding in two situations:

1. When cue-bidding has enabled you to keep the level low.
2. When your weak suit has been cue-bid.

This is an example of the first case:

♠ A K 8 7 6		♠ Q J 10 4
♥ K Q 3		♥ J 7 4 2
♦ 3		♦ K Q J
♣ A K 7 3		♣ Q 6

West	East
1♠	3♠
4♣	4♠
End	

After 1♠ – 3♠ West could use Key-Card Blackwood (KCB) – he has control of all the suits and plenty of strength – but before doing so he should find out whether East has a red-suit control by bidding 4♣. If East cannot cue-bid 4♦ or 4♥, then 4♠ is high enough. A heart ruff might take 5♠ down.

♠ A K 8 7 6		♠ Q J 10 4
♥ K Q 3		♥ 9 2
♦ 3		♦ A J 7 4
♣ A K 7 3		♣ Q J 2

West	East
1♠	3♠
4♣	4♦
4NT	5♦
6♠	End

However, if partner can cue-bid, here showing the ace of diamonds, then you can use KCB and go on to the slam.

Next is an example of using KCB when your weak suit has been cue-bid:

♠ A K 8 7 6		♠ Q J 10 4
♥ 2		♥ K 8 3
♦ 3 2		♦ A 9 7 4
♣ A K Q J 3		♣ 9 8

West	East
1♠	3♠
4♣	4♦
4NT	5♦
6♠	End

West cannot use Blackwood because of his weakness in diamonds, so he starts with a 4♣ cue-bid. However, when he hears East bid 4♦ he knows his weakness is covered, so he can use KCB and then bid on to the excellent slam.

Without the diamond cue-bid, West would continue cue-bidding to try to find out whether East had second-round control of diamonds:

♠ A K 8 7 6		♠ Q J 10 4
♥ 2		♥ A K 8
♦ 3 2		♦ 10 9 7 4
♣ A K Q J 3		♣ 9 8

West	East
1♠	3♠
4♣	4♥
5♣	5♥
5♠	End

When East can only cue-bid hearts (showing first- and second-round control, and denying a diamond control) West can be sure that there are two diamond losers and that the slam is not on.

Do not mistake a cue-bid for a game try

Trial bids in the majors are used after weak two-level raises, when the idea of a slam is not even in our thoughts, e.g. 1♥ – 2♥ – 3♣. It can only be a cue-bid if it is above three of the agreed suit, e.g. 1♥ – 2♥ – 4♣.

However, there can be a little confusion

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when bidding the minors (e.g. 1♣ – 3♣), as we have seen on page 9. You should start by assuming that partner is trying for no-trumps, then if he does not bid 3NT but a suit at the four level, you know he is cue-bidding and trying for a slam, and you proceed accordingly.

Other examples

♠ A Q J 7 4	♠ K 10 3 2
♥ 5 2	♥ A 9 4
♦ A	♦ J 5 4 3
♣ A Q J 5 4	♣ K 2

West	East
1♠	3♠
4♣	4♥
4NT	5♥
5NT	6♣
7♠	End

This hand illustrates how cue-bidding can be effectively combined with Key-Card Blackwood (Key-card Blackwood was discussed at length in the previous issue and the article is available from the **Mr Bridge** on-line library at www.mrbridge.co.uk/library/library.shtm).

West cannot use Blackwood because of his weak hearts, so he starts to cue-bid, but as soon as he hears his partner cue-bid hearts (4♥), he can introduce KCB. His partner shows two key cards (one ace and the king of trumps). Now West continues with 5NT, asking for kings, and East replies by showing the king of clubs.

That is just the card West needed and he can confidently bid 7♠.

♠ A K 5 2	♠ Q J 6 4
♥ 9 5	♥ K Q 2
♦ 10 3	♦ A K Q J 4
♣ A J 8 7 6	♣ 2

West	East
1♣	1♦
1♠	4NT
5♠	6♠
End	

Let me repeat it once more: you should only cue-bid if you have to. East has a wonderful hand and as soon as he hears 1♠ from West he wants to try for slam in spades. He does not need cue-bidding, he simply needs to know about key cards: the ace and king of spades, the ace of hearts and the ace of clubs – all of which he can find out about by bidding 4NT. When West shows three key-cards, East can bid 6♠.

♠ K Q 9 8 7 6	♠ A J 10 4
♥ 7 6	♥ Q 3 2
♦ A K Q	♦ 7 6
♣ K Q	♣ A J 5 3

West	East
1♠	3♠
4♦	5♣
5♦	5♠
End	

On this last deal West has weak hearts and so avoids Blackwood; instead he cue-bids 4♦ to find out if East has a heart control. It's a neat auction, because after West's 5♦ bid East can work out what West needs: with all the suits bid except for hearts, it is clear that a heart control is required. East's queen is not good enough for that, so he signs off in 5♠.

Conclusion

Cue-bidding is difficult, but it is a very useful aid – without it, a lot of slam bidding is guesswork. However, try to heed my advice and use it only when necessary. Mind you, when you do get a cue-bidding auction right and bid to a good slam, there are few better feelings in bridge – other than making the slam afterwards!

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